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The Great Mining Panic

Nicaragua sent a formal message of thanks and commendation to the U.S. Senate last week when the latter lost its cool and shouted through a resolution condemning the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. We at least hope that this bit of Sandinista solicitousness caused a few members of the World's Greatest Deliberative Body to have some second thoughts, but we doubt it.

Congress generally acted as if the mining was a great and shocking surprise. But as our solons love to demand of others, what did they know and when did they know it?

The Nicaraguan "contras" fighting with some CIA help against the Marxist regime publicly announced in January that they planned to mine the harbor. The action, they said, was intended to disrupt Cuban and Russian arms shipments to the Sandinistas. Ocean shipping insurers began to raise rates. Seven ships, including a Soviet vessel, subsequently were damaged. This was duly reported in the newspapers.

So the mining itself was hardly a dastardly plot unknown to shippers or others who might be affected by it. Within the U.S. government, it was no case of a "rogue CIA" running out of control, either. President Reagan approved the involvement several months ago, as he is required by law to do. The House Intelligence Committee was briefed in full about it more recently. The staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee received a full briefing two weeks ago. A member of the Senate committee, Barry Goldwater, expressed outrage that he hadn't been told about the operation, but the fault was his staff's, which apparently failed to brief him on the briefing. Sen. Moynihan says he thinks he may have been told about the mining, but confesses he didn't pay much attention at the time.

So a lot was known about the mining well before it was blown into a big issue. Indeed, it became an issue precisely *because* so much was known by our senators and congressmen. The details, it's now clear, were leaked to the press by congressional committee sources in ways calculated to create maximum political panic.

The leaks followed a pattern that has become a familiar pattern since Congress gained increased "oversight" power over intelligence activities in the early 1970s. Dozens of

Capitol Hill denizens with intense partisan interests now have access to the highest and "dirtiest" secrets of the republic. Armed with such information, they cannot resist scoring political points by revealing choice details that seem at first blush embarrassing to their opponents.

Whatever you think of plopping mines into Nicaragua's harbors, leaks are a lousy way to run a government. They make life very risky for our friends, who can never be sure when some ambitious young aide on Capitol Hill will stab them in the back. The practice also weakens our own ability to encourage proxy groups to take small-scale action in the hopes of averting bloodier confrontation by our own forces in the future.

As it stands, we see no evidence that the United States violated international law. It helped train and supply the "contras," but it didn't actually sow the mines. And if that's a violation of some ethical or moral code, it must be a pretty selective code. Cuban, Soviet, and Sandinistan efforts to train and arm gunmen of their own throughout Latin America don't seem to have brought forth the same sense of outrage. Where was this sense of high dudgeon when Marxist-led thugs in El Salvador tried to disrupt the recent elections there?

Congress, basking in compliments from Nicaragua's new dictators — true connoisseurs of selective outrage — is now poised to return the favor by killing a \$21-million appropriation for the "contras." Never mind that Nicaragua last year received \$90 million in military equipment — that we could count — mostly from Cuba and Russia. Edward Kennedy and Co. are talking about Moral Principles!

Last week's vote won't likely go down as one of Congress' finer moments. We well may have cause to regret the political panic the leakers have created. Before exulting in this embarrassment of the Reagan administration, "progressives" might want to remember another resolution whooped through Congress in 1966 — the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave Lyndon Johnson free rein to widen the Vietnam War. Congress should move quickly to prevent further damage by making it clear to our friends that we aren't going to cut and run. Then, to back good words with sound deeds, the solons should amend a congressional oversight process that has run amok.

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